

# Overcoming Empiricism

— Notes on studying Lenin's "Materialism and Empirio-Criticism"

by Ni Chih-fu

**F**OLLOWING Chairman Mao's teaching "Read and study seriously and have a good grasp of Marxism," I have stepped up my efforts to study several works by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin and Chairman Mao's works in a planned way over the past two years. Recently I have studied Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and I have come to realize more deeply than ever that it is all the more necessary for me, formerly an ordinary worker and now holding some leading posts, to redouble my efforts to study revolutionary theory, overcome empiricism and enhance my consciousness of the struggle between the two lines. Only in this way can I become a conscious and sober-minded proletarian revolutionary and firmly advance under the guidance of Chairman Mao's revolutionary line.

## Two Opposing Theories of Experience

Chairman Mao has pointed out: "Idealism and mechanical materialism, opportunism and adventurism, are all characterized by the breach between the subjective and the objective, by the separation of knowledge from practice." (*On Practice*.) Bogdanov and other swindlers like him who had sneaked into the Party in Russia were such opportunists. In his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Lenin concentrated his efforts on trenchantly exposing this characteristic of theirs. While these scoundrels opposed revolutionary practice, negated the materialist theory of experience and advocated the idealist theory of experience, they also opposed the revolutionary theories, viciously slandered dialectical materialism as "mysticism" and "dogmatism" and racked their brains to replace materialism and Marxism with idealism and revisionism. In this respect, they were by no means isolated cases; Liu Shao-chi and other political swindlers did exactly the same. While working overtime to trumpet the so-called theory of "genius," they opposed the materialist viewpoint that man's talent originates from practice; at the same time, they frantically attacked Marxism-Leninism as outdated and vainly attempted to separate the revolutionary theories from the revolutionary masses so as to lead them astray and deceive

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them. All this shows that while we wage struggles against opportunism, we must uphold the viewpoint of giving first place to practice and oppose idealist apriorism, and at the same time attach importance to the guiding role of the revolutionary theories and guard against and overcome empiricism so as to avoid landing ourselves in idealism and metaphysics.

Marxism maintains that experience comes from practice in class struggle, the struggle for production and scientific experiment. "All genuine knowledge originates in direct experience." (*On Practice*.) This is true from my own experience. An example is the *chun* drill bit.\* This has not dropped from the skies, nor is it innate in our minds. It is the outcome of some one thousand experiments made by members of our research group who have had over a dozen years of experience at the bench and who have drawn on the advanced experience at home and abroad. In other words, it was created on the basis of the practical experience of the drilling machine operators.

Similarly, I have learnt much from my own experience. I became a child labourer at 11 in a factory owned by a foreign capitalist in Shanghai. Toiling like a beast of burden, I barely eked out a living. I had my fill of sufferings from harsh oppression by foreign capitalists and the exploiting classes. It was under the leadership of Chairman Mao and the Communist Party that we drove away the imperialist pirates and overthrew the reactionary Kuomintang rule and the evil exploitation system. We workers have since become masters of our own destiny and are now living a happy life under socialism. Nurtured and educated by the Party, I quickly raised my political consciousness. My proletarian feelings—deep hatred of capitalism and ardent love for socialism—are not inborn but are the result of my personal experience. Prolonged practice in class struggle and the struggle for production has enabled me to realize that direct experience is very valuable because it is first in order in the process of cognition. Without direct experience, our knowledge would be like trees without roots and water without a source. In order to correctly know and

\* This refers to a new-type drill bit invented by Ni Chih-fu and the group he belongs to by toppling conventional theories on bit designing. The new bit has increased efficiency and service life by two to fivefold and three to fourfold respectively. The fruit of collective wisdom, it is named after the Chinese character *chun* which means group or the masses.

transform the world, we revolutionaries must respect practice and experience.

In opposing the materialist line with regard to knowledge, all idealists invariably do all they can to negate the objective reality of the contents of experience. In order to disguise themselves and deceive others, they often resort to the old trick of holding up the banner of "experience" but actually interpreting experience from an idealist point of view. This was exactly what Bogdanov and his ilk did. They babbled that experience and consciousness were "identical concepts," the "psychical" and the sum total of sensations, and so on and so forth, that they did not originate in practice and had no objective contents, but came of themselves subjectively. So in appearance they were talking about "experience," but in reality their distortions and adulterations had turned experience into something idealistic. Lenin incisively exposed and criticized their trick of playing with the concept of "experience" when he pointed out that "there is no doubt that both the materialist and idealist . . . lines in philosophy may be concealed beneath the word 'experience.'" (*Materialism and Empirio-Criticism.*) It can thus be seen that adherence to the objective reality of the contents of experience is the prerequisite for upholding the materialist line on cognition.

#### Never Regard Experience as Absolute

Can we automatically do our work according to the materialist line on cognition when we have direct experience? No. We would commit mistakes of empiricism if we regard direct experience as something absolute and rigid—using partial experience as an unalterable formula and applying it everywhere, using old experience to look at new things which have developed and changed, or overrating our partial experience and underrating or even denying the correct experience of others and the masses. And the result would be that we still could not make a clean break with the idealist theory of experience advertised by Bogdanov and his like and would consciously or unconsciously sink into the quagmire of idealism.

All things in the world are interconnected and at the same time different from one another. In practice, we should not only pay attention to the general character of things. More important, we should pay attention to the individual character of everything, that is, the particular contradiction it contains which distinguishes it from other things, so as to take appropriate measures to solve the contradiction accordingly. This is what we mean by using the right key to open the lock. Likewise, we cannot use one prescription to cure all diseases. As to experiences gained from one thing, some may be applicable to other things, others may be partly applicable and still others may be completely inapplicable. To neglect the particularity of contradictions and mechanically apply old experience is empiricism.

For instance, I used to bore holes on steel, so I was quite familiar with the characteristics of processing

all types of steel, but did not know much about the properties of cast iron and copper. Once when I was asked to process such metals, I took for granted that they were more or less the same as steel, so I worked in the same way as I processed steel parts. As a result, the first drill bit got burnt in no time and the second one was broken before it had bored deep. What was the reason? It was simply because I one-sidedly stuck to the old experience I had gained in drilling steel and regarded partial experience as something absolute. Since I took no notice of the specific properties of cast iron and copper and did not use different methods to resolve qualitatively different contradictions, I divorced the subjective from the objective and thus ran into snags.

Everything in the world is changing and manifests itself at a certain stage in the process of its development. Therefore our thinking should not overstep the given stage of development of the objective things and we should not do at present what can only be done in the future, dreaming of accomplishing everything at one stroke. Nevertheless, as the objective things change, our thinking must change accordingly, so that we will not lag behind the development of the objective reality and not use "old experience" to solve new problems. We say that past experience is correct because it is gained through practice. But if we cling to it when conditions have changed, then such experience becomes something subjective.

Since I took up a leading post in the factory, I have been confronted with many problems every day. Being an old hand in this factory, I subjectively thought that I was well acquainted with its conditions, political as well as in production, and that with my past experience I could adequately deal with any problem. But contrary to what I had imagined, I failed to do some of my work satisfactorily though I tried hard. The reason for this was that the conditions had been constantly developing and changing and that new problems different from those in the past kept cropping up, while I was still accustomed to doing things in the old way and my thinking was lagging behind reality. To remedy this situation, I later paid attention to carrying out investigations and study, and strove to improve my methods of work, freeing myself from routine work so as to devote more time and energy to problems relating to the political orientation and line. In this way, I gained greater initiative in my work.

The realm of practical activity is extremely wide, but the scope of an individual's practice is always limited. While we attach importance to direct experience gained from personal practice, we should also treasure the creations of the masses, be good at making investigations and study, and learn with an open mind from other people's experience. Only thus can we do our work well.

Recalling how the *chun* drill bit was invented and innovated, I came to a deep understanding that practice

by the masses is a veritable sea of wisdom. It was only after we had conscientiously studied and investigated the masses' inventions and innovations in drilling and absorbed nourishment from their rich experiences that we were able to make the five comparatively big changes on the *chun* drill bit. One cannot have direct experience in everything. Actually most knowledge comes from indirect experience. If anyone believes only in himself and sets his personal experience against the masses' and direct experience against indirect, he will also commit empiricist errors. Chairman Mao has said: **"It is also necessary to learn with an open mind from other people's experience, and it is sheer 'narrow empiricism' to insist on one's own personal experience in all matters and, in its absence, to adhere stubbornly to one's own opinions and reject other people's experience."** (*Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War.*)

In order to push their revisionist political lines, all opportunists, from Bogdanov in Russia to political swindlers like Liu Shao-chi in China, always frenziedly opposed materialism and advocated idealism. Empiricism is a manifestation of subjectivism and formalism. Ideologically, it runs counter to the fundamental principles of dialectical materialism and historical materialism. This is the ideological root cause why empiricists often blindly follow "Left" or Right opportunists. Following the victory of Marxism in theory, revisionists resort more and more to rumours and sophistry to deceive the people. As Lenin said: **"An ever subtler falsification of Marxism, an ever subtler presentation of anti-materialist doctrines under the guise of Marxism — this is the characteristic feature of modern revisionism in political economy, in questions of tactics and in philosophy generally, equally in epistemology and in sociology."** (*Materialism and Empirio-Criticism.*) Under these circumstances, because those people with empiricism neglect the guiding role of Marxism in revolutionary practice, pay no attention to studying revolutionary theory, are complacent over occasional successes and glimpses of the truth, are intoxicated with narrow, non-principled "practicalism" and with being brainless "practical men" with no future, and lack firm and correct political orientation, they are easy ideological captives of political swindlers who are sham Marxists.

### Overcoming Empiricism by Conscientious Study

The fundamental way to overcome empiricism is to study Marxism conscientiously. In his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Lenin summed up the historical experience of the struggle over ideology and political line within the Party in Russia and repeatedly explained the importance and necessity of studying Marxist theory. To criticize the Machists in Russia, he quoted copiously from Marx's and Engels' main philosophical works, dealing fatal blows at the idealist theory of experience of Bogdanov and his like, thereby setting a brilliant example for us theoretically and in practice. In order to criticize empiricism theoretically, we must study philosophy. Chairman Mao has said: **"Those**

**experienced in work must take up the study of theory and must read seriously; only then will they be able to systematize and synthesize their experience and raise it to the level of theory, only then will they not mistake their partial experience for universal truth and not commit empiricist errors."** (*Rectify the Party's Style of Work.*) A worker-cadre like me has deep class sentiments for the Party and Chairman Mao as well as experience in my work, but simple class sentiments cannot replace consciousness in the struggle between the two lines and pure practical experience cannot replace Marxism-Leninism. If I should overlook the importance of studying Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought, which is a summing-up of the experience of the world revolution and the Chinese revolution, I cannot avoid committing empiricist errors.

Although direct experience gained from practice reflects certain reality of the objective world, it is only perceptual knowledge and the reflection is superficial, partial and incomplete. **"Without comparatively complete knowledge it is impossible to do revolutionary work well."** (*Rectify the Party's Style of Work.*) To transform incomplete knowledge into comparatively complete knowledge, it is necessary to conscientiously study revolutionary theory, use the Marxist-Leninist standpoint, view and method to sum up one's direct experience, especially the experience in class struggle and the struggle between the two lines, and to make a leap from perceptual to rational knowledge through reconstruction — discarding the dross and selecting the essential, eliminating the false and retaining the true, proceeding from the one to the other and from the outside to the inside. In this process, the correct standpoint, view and method are especially important. A leap in cognition cannot be realized without the Marxist standpoint, view and method. If one looks at things from the empiricist viewpoint, he will not be able to distinguish the dross from the essential, but will reverse falsehood and truth. And of course he cannot correctly learn from the experience — both positive and negative — in class struggle and the struggle between the two lines. It is only by studying conscientiously to gradually grasp the viewpoints of dialectical materialism and historical materialism that one can know the essence of things in a deep and comprehensive way, grasp the law of objective things, and enhance consciousness and avoid blindness in work.

Lenin said: **"By following the path of Marxian theory we shall draw closer and closer to objective truth (without ever exhausting it); but by following any other path we shall arrive at nothing but confusion and lies."** (*Materialism and Empirio-Criticism.*) Class struggle and the struggle between the two lines will exist for a long time. New contradictions will arise after the old ones have been resolved, and after victory in one battle, one has to fight new battles. The changing movement of the objective world will never end, neither will our knowledge of truth in our practice. Therefore, we should make revolution and continue to study as long as we live.